ON THE SHORTNESS OF LIFE

LUCIUS SENECA

ADAPTED FOR THE CONTEMPORARY READER BY JAMES HARRIS

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ISBN: 9781539951919

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1.

The majority of people complain bitterly that Nature is cruel, that we exist for a brief span, because this time that has been granted to us rushes by so fast and so swiftly that all but a very few find what it is to live. Not only is it the ordinary people, or those who don't think that moan about what is, as most deem it, a universal ill; but the same feeling has also called forth complaint from those who are famous. It was this that made the greatest of physicians of all time exclaim that "life is short, art is long;" it was this that led Aristotle, while expressing disapproval with nature, condemning it to such an extent that it seemed quite unusual for such a wise man, that, in point of age, life has shown more favour to animals that they drag out five or ten lifetimes, but that a much shorter limit has been given for man, though he is born for so many and such great achievements. It is not that we have a short space of time, but that we waste much of it. Life is long enough, and it has been given in sufficiently generous quantity to allow the accomplishment of the very greatest things if the whole of it is well invested. But when it is squandered in luxury and carelessness, when it

is devoted to no good end, forced at last by the ultimate necessity, towards the end, we perceive that it has passed away before we were aware that it was passing. So it is—that the life we receive is not short, but we make it so, and there is no lack of it, but we are wasteful of it. Just as great and princely wealth is scattered in a moment when it comes into the hands of a reckless owner, while wealth however limited, if it is entrusted to a good guardian, increases by use, so our life is amply long for the person who uses it wisely.

2.

Why do we complain about the nature of time? Life, if you know how to use it, is long, but one man is possessed by an insatiable desire for success and power, another by tiresome devotion to tasks that are useless; one man is seeking escape through drugs and alcohol, another is paralyzed by laziness; one man is exhausted by an ambition that always hangs upon the opinions of others, another, led by marketing and greed of the companies, goes to great lengths in hope of gaining status; some are tormented by a passion for conflict and are always either bent upon inflicting danger to others or concerned about their own; and there are some who are worn out by voluntary servitude of employers who offer no real rewards; many are kept busy either in the pursuit of other men's fortunes or complaining about their own; many, following no fixed aim, shifting, inconstant and dissatisfied, are plunged by their indecisiveness into plans that are ever new; some have no fixed principle by which to direct their course, but Fate takes them unaware while they are completely oblivious— This happens so certainly that I cannot doubt the truth of greatest of poets who

state that: "The part of life we really live is small". All the rest of existence is not life, but merely time. Vices surround us on every side, and they do not permit us to rise or open our eyes to the truth, but they keep us down once they have overwhelmed us, and chain us to lust. Their victims are never allowed to return to their true selves; if ever they have a chance to find a release, like the waters of the deep sea which continue to heave even after the storm has past, they are tossed about, and no rest from their lust is allowed. Look at those whose prosperity men wish to have; they are already blessed with much and do not realise, to many, being rich is a burden! How many of the richest struggle to display their powers! How many are lifeless from constant pleasures! How many successful people are surrounded and offered no freedom! In short, run through the list of all these men from the lowest to the highest—this man desires a supporter, this one gives support, that one is on trial, that one defends him, that one gives the sentence; no one claims them self, because in this society everyone acts for the sake of another. Ask about the famous whose names are known by heart, and you will see that these are the marks that distinguish them: A cultivates B and B

cultivates C; no one is his own master. And then certain men show the most senseless behavior — complaining about the position of the rich, when they contribute to their creation. No one can complain about the pride of another when he himself has no time to attend to himself. After all, no matter who you are, a great man will sometimes look toward you even if his face is insolent, even if he does condescend listening to your words, he still permits you to appear at his side; but you never cared to look upon yourself, to listen to yourself. There is no reason then, to complain about anyone's behavior if you cannot endure your own.

3.

All the brilliant intellects of the ages were able to concentrate upon this one theme, but none could adequately express their wonder at this dense darkness of the human mind. Men who do not suffer threats are quick to prepare for war over the slightest preconceived danger. Yet they allow others to trespass upon their life without any barriers, they themselves even lead in those people who will eventually possess their time. No one is willing to distribute their money, yet among how many people do we see the distribution of their life! In guarding their fortune people are often tightfisted, yet, when it comes to the matter of wasting time, which is the one thing they should have the right to be miserly over, they show themselves most uncontrolled. I invite you to imagine being in the company of older men and women who say: "You have now reached the furthest part of your life, approaching your hundredth year, or perhaps even beyond it, recall your life and estimate, how much of your time was taken up working for another, how much with a mistress, how much repaying debts, how much with clients for a business which does not serve you, how

much in arguing with your wife, how much rushing about the city socializing but gaining nothing from it. Add the diseases of your body and mind which have been caused by you own acts, add, too, the time that has been left idle and unused; you will see that you have fewer years to your credit than you count. Look back in memory and consider when you ever had a fixed plan, how few days you can say you lived with intent, when you were ever at your own disposal, when your face ever wore its natural expression, when your mind was ever relaxed, what work you have achieved in such a long life, how many have robbed you of life when you were not aware of what you were losing, how much was taken up in useless sorrow, in foolish joy, in greedy desire, in the allurements of society, how little of yourself was left to you; you will perceive that you are dying before you have really lived. What, then, is the reason of this? You live as if you were destined to live forever, no thought of your frailty ever entered your head, of how much time has already gone by and you take no notice. You squander time as if you had a full and abundant supply, though one day which you waste on some person or thing could be your last. You have all the fears of mortals and

all the desires of immortals. You will hear many say: "After my fiftieth year I will retire into leisure, my sixtieth year I will no longer have any public duties" And what guarantee do you have that your life will last longer than this? And who else but yourself will suffer this course, waiting until a fixed time to actually live. Are you not ashamed to reserve for yourself only the remnant of life, and to set apart only that time to devote to yourself? How late it is to begin to live just when we must cease to live! What foolish forgetfulness of mortality to postpone plans to the fiftieth and sixtieth year, and to intend to begin life at a point to which few have attained in good health!

4.

You will see that even the most powerful and highly placed men drop remarks that they long for leisure, praise it, and prefer it to all their blessings. They desire at times to descend from their high pinnacle; without anything shattering their fortune. The highly regarded Augustus, did not cease when praying for rest and seeking a release from public affairs; all his conversations wondered on to this subject—his hope for leisure. This was a sweet, even if in vain, consolation for which he would be pleased with in return for his labour—that he would one day live for himself. In a letter addressed to the senate, in which he had promised that his rest would not be devoid of dignity or inconsistent with his former glory, I find these words: "These matters can be shown better by deed than by promises. Nevertheless, since the joyful reality is still in the distance, my desire for that time has led me to savor some of its delight by the pleasure of writing about it." It was so desirable to him that he anticipated it in thought because he could not attain it in reality. He saw that everything depended upon himself alone, and realized that the fortune of

individuals and of nations, did not compare to his highest thought that one day in the future he should lay aside his greatness. He had discovered how much sweat those blessings drew, how many secret worries they concealed. Forced to fight first against his countrymen, then against his colleagues, and lastly against his relatives, he shed blood on land and sea. Through Macedonia, Sicily, Egypt, Syria, and Asia, and almost all countries he followed the path of battle, and when his troops were weary of shedding Roman blood, he turned them to foreign wars. Once he had cut away these ulcers together with the limbs, others would grow in their place; just as a body that was overburdened with blood, there was always a rupture somewhere. And so he longed for leisure, in the hope and thought of which he found relief for his labours. This was the prayer of one who was able to answer the prayers of mankind.

5.

Marcus Cicero, long known among men like Catiline and Clodius and Pompey and Crassus, some who were open enemies, and others doubtful friends, was tossed to and fro along with the state that he sought to keep from destruction, which was at last swept away. He was unable to be restful in prosperity or patient in adversity—how many times does he curse that very position of his, which he had also praised without end! How tearful were the words he uses in a letter–written to Atticus, when Pompey the elder had been conquered, and the son was still trying to restore his shattered arms in Spain! "Do you ask" he said, "what I am doing here? I am lingering in my Tusculan villa half a prisoner." He then proceeds to other statements, in which he exhibits regret over his former life, complains of the present and despairs the future. Cicero said that he was "half a prisoner." But, in very truth, no wise man would resort to such a lowly term, and never will he be half a prisoner. He who always possesses an undiminished and stable liberty, being free and his own master, towers over all others. For what can possibly be above him who is above

Fortune or fate?

6.

When Livius Drusus, a bold and energetic man, had the support of a huge crowd drawn from all of Italy, he proposed new laws and evil measures. Seeing no way out for his policy, which he could neither carry through or abandon once started on, he is said to have complained bitterly about a life of unrest that he had from the cradle, and exclaimed that he was the only person who had never had a holiday - even as a boy. While he was still a young boy, he had the courage to persuade jurys and to make his influence felt in the law-courts, so powerfully, indeed, that it is very well known that in certain trials he forced a favorable outcome. To what lengths was such premature ambition destined to go? One might have known that such precocious hardihood would result in great personal and public misfortune. And so it was too late for him to complain that he had never had a holiday when from boyhood he had been a trouble-maker and a nuisance in the forum. It is a question whether he died by his own hand; because he fell from a sudden wound received in his groin, some doubting whether his death was voluntary, but not doubts as to whether it was

timely. It would be unnecessary to mention who, but those that have expressed their loathing for every act of their years, and with their own lips have given testimony against themselves; but by these complaints have changed neither themselves nor others. For when they have vented their feelings in words, they fall back into their usual round. Heaven knows! Such lives as these, though they shall continue to exist for thousands of years, will shrink into the merest span; vices will swallow up any amount of time. The space given, which reason can prolong, although it naturally hurries away, of necessity escapes from you quickly; for you do not seize it, you neither hold it back, nor impose delay upon the swiftest thing in the world, but you allow it to slip away as if it were something unnecessary and that it could easily be replaced.

7.

But among the worst I count are those who have time for nothing but alcohol and lust; for none have more shameful engrossments. The others, even if they are possessed by the empty dream of glory, nevertheless go astray in a similar manner; though you should cite to me the men who are greedy, the men who are wrathful, whether occupied with unjust hatreds or with unjust wars, these all sin in a manlier fashion. But those who are plunged into the pleasures of the belly and into lust, bear a stain that is dishonorable. Search into the hours of all these people, and see how much time they give to stories, how much to creating traps, how much to fearing them, how much to paying court fees, how much to being courted, how much is taken up in giving or receiving bail, how much by banquets—for even these have now become a matter of business— and you will see how their interests, whether you call them evil or good, do not allow them time to breathe. Finally, everybody agrees that no one pursuit can be successfully followed by a man who is occupied with many things— eloquence cannot exist, nor expansive studying—since the mind, when its interests

are divided, takes in nothing very deeply, but rejects everything that is, as it were, crammed into it. There is nothing the busy man is less occupied with than living: there is nothing that is harder to learn. Of the arts there are many teachers everywhere; some of them we have seen that mere boys have studied so thoroughly that they could even play the master. It takes the whole of life to learn how to live, and—what will perhaps make you wonder more—it takes the whole of life to learn how to die. Many very great men, having laid aside all their burdens, having renounced riches, business, and pleasures, have made it their one aim up to the very end of life to know how to live; yet the greater number of them have departed from life confessing that they did not yet know. Believe me, it takes a great man and one who has risen far above human weaknesses not to allow any of his time to be stolen from him, and it follows that the life of such a man is very long because he has devoted wholly to himself whatever time he has had. None of it was neglected and idle; none of it was under the control of another, for, guarding it most grudgingly, he found nothing that was worthy to be taken in exchange for his time. And so that man has

enough time, but those who have been robbed of much of their life by the public, have necessarily not had enough of it. And there is no reason for you to suppose that these people are not sometimes aware of their loss. Indeed, you will hear many of those who are burdened even by great prosperity cry out at times, dealing with their endless lists of clients, or being in court, or their other glorious miseries: "I have no chance to live." Of course you have no chance! All those who summon you for themselves, turn you away from your own self. Of how many days has that court case robbed you? Of how many that potential problem? Of how many that very powerful friend who has you and others on the list, not as his friends, but as his supporters? Check off, I say, and review the days of your life; you will see very few, and only find those that have been left for you. That man who had prayed for power when he attains it, desires to lay it aside and says over and over: "When will this year be over!" That man creates games and, after setting great value on gaining the chance to win them, now says: "When shall I be rid of them?" The man who is given great approval throughout the whole forum, and fills the place with a great crowd that stretches farther than

he can be heard, still says: "When will vacation time come?" Everyone hurries their life on and suffers from a yearning for the future and a weariness of the present. But he who bestows all of his time on his own needs, who plans out every day as if it were his last, neither longs for nor fears tomorrow. For what new pleasure is there that any hour can now bring? They are all known, all have been enjoyed to the full. Fortune may deal out the rest as she likes; his life has already found safety. Something may be added to it, but nothing taken from it. He will take excess in addition like the man who is full up and takes the food which he does not desire. And so there is no reason for you to think that any man has lived long because he has grey hairs or wrinkles; he has not lived long—he has existed long. Would you think that a man has had a long voyage, if he had been caught by a fierce storm as soon as he left harbour, swept hither and thither by a succession of winds that raged from different quarters, and had to drive around in a circle? You would think not much voyaging was done, but much tossing about.

8.

I am often filled with wonder when I see some men demanding the time of others, and those who they ask of it are most indulgent. Both of them fix their eyes on the object of the request for time, neither of them on the time itself; just as if what is asked were nothing, what is given, nothing. Men treat with little respect the most precious thing in the world; but they are blind to it because it is not physical, because it does not come to the sight of the eyes, and for this reason it is counted as a very cheap thing—or of almost no value at all. Men save towards great pensions, and for these they hire out their labour, service and effort, but no one sets a value on time; all use it lavishly as if it cost nothing. But see how these same people grab the knees of physicians if they fall ill and the danger of death draws nearer, see how ready they are, if threatened with capital punishment, to spend all their possessions in order to live! So great is the inconsistency of their feelings. But if each one could have the number of his future years set before him as is possible in the case of the years that have passed, how alarmed those would be who saw only a few remaining, how sparing of them would they

be! And yet it is easy to dispense an amount that is assured, no matter how small it may be; but it must be guarded even more carefully when you fail to know how much is left. Yet there is no reason for you to suppose that these people do not know how precious a thing time is; for to those they love most devotedly, they have a habit of saying that they are willing to give them a portion of their own years. And they do give it, without realizing however; that the result of their giving is that they themselves suffer loss without adding to the years of their dear ones. But the very thing they do not know is that they are suffering loss; therefore, the removal of something that is lost without being noticed to them is bearable. Yet no one will give you these years back. Life will follow the path it started upon, and will neither reverse nor check its course; it will make no noise, it will not remind you of its swiftness. Silent it will glide on; it will not prolong itself at the command of a king, or at the applause of society. Just as it was started on its first day, so it will run; nowhere will it turn aside, nowhere will it delay. And what will be the result? You have been engrossed, life hastens by; meanwhile death will be at hand, for which, whether you like it or not,

you must find leisure.

9.

Can anything be sillier than the point of view of some people—I mean those who boast of their foresight? They keep themselves very busily engaged in order that they may be able to live better; they spend life in making it ready to live! They form their purposes with a view to the distant future; yet postponement is the greatest waste of life; it deprives them of each day as it comes, it snatches from them the present by promising something here after. The greatest hindrance to living is expectancy, which depends upon tomorrow and wastes the present. You hope for that which lies in the hands of Fortune, yet you let go of that which lies in your own. Where do you look? At what goal do you aim? All things that are still to come lie in uncertainty; live straight away! See how the greatest of poets cry out, as if inspired with divine utterance: The fairest day in an unfortunate mortals' life: Is a day lost. "Why do you delay," says he, "Why are you idle? Unless you seize the day, it flees." Even though you seize it, it still will flee; therefore, you must compete with time's swiftness in the speed of using it, and, from it, like a torrent that rushes by and will not always flow, you

must drink quickly. And so, speaking of the poet who admirably wrote to eliminate infinite delay, in that he says, not "the fairest age," but "the fairest day." Why, to whatever length your greed inclines, do you stretch before yourself months and years in long array, unconcerned that time flies so fast? The poet speaks to you about the day, and about this very day that is flying. Is there any doubt then, that for unfortunate mortals, that is, for the men who are engrossed, the fairest day be the first to be lost? Old age surprises them while their minds are still childish, and they come to it unprepared and unarmed, for they have made no provision for it; they have stumbled upon it suddenly and unexpectedly, they did not notice that it was drawing nearer day by day. Just as conversation, or reading, or deep meditation on some subject charms the traveler, he finds that he has reached the end of his journey before he was aware that he was approaching it, just so with this unceasing and most swift journey of life, which we make at the same pace whether awake or sleeping; those who are engrossed become aware of it only at the end.

10.

Should I choose to divide my subject into different headings with their separate proofs, many arguments will occur to me by which I could prove that busy men find life very short. But Fabianus who was none of your lecture-room philosophers of today, but one of the genuine and old-fashioned kind, used to say that we must fight against the passions with main force, not with trickery, and that the battle-line must be breached by a bold attack, not by inflicting pinpricks; that false arguments are not adequate, for the passions must be, not nipped, but crushed. Yet, in order that the victims of them may be cured, each for his own particular fault, I say that they must be instructed, not merely wept over. Life is divided into three periods—that which has been, that which is, that which will be. Of these the present time is short, the future is doubtful, the past is certain. The last one however is the one over which Fortune has lost control, is the one which cannot be brought back under any man's power. But men who are engrossed lose this; for they have no time to look back upon the past, and even if they should have, it is not pleasant to recall

something they must view with regret. They are, therefore, are unwilling to direct their thoughts backward to ill-spent hours, for the very few who do, and those whose vices become obvious if they review the past, even the vices which were disguised under some allurement of momentary pleasure, do not have the courage to change based on the review. No one willingly turns his thought back to the past, unless all his acts have been submitted to the censorship of his conscience, which is never deceived; he who has ambitiously yearned to possess, proudly scorned, recklessly conquered, treacherously betrayed, greedily seized, or lavishly squandered, must fear his own memory. And yet this is the part of our time that is sacred and set apart, put beyond the reach of all human accidents, and removed from the dominion of fortune, the part which is worried by no want, by no fear, by no attacks of disease; this can neither be troubled nor be snatched away—it is an everlasting and unanxious possession. The present offers only one day at a time, and each by minutes; but all the days of past will appear when you call them, you can behold them and keep them at your will—a thing which those who are engrossed have no time to do.

The mind that is untroubled and tranquil has the power to roam into all the parts of its life; but the minds of the engrossed cannot turn and look behind. And so their life vanishes into an abyss; just as it does not matter how much water you pour into a vessel, if there is no bottom to receive and hold it. So with time—it makes no difference how much is given; if there is nothing for it to settle upon, it passes out through the chinks and holes of the mind. Present time is very brief, so brief, indeed, that to some there seems to be none; for it is always in motion, it ever flows and hurries on; it ceases to be before it has come. The engrossed, therefore, are concerned with present time alone, and it is so brief that it cannot be grasped, and even this is taken away from them, distracted as they are among many things.

11.

See how eager they are to live long! Decrepit old men beg in their prayers for the addition of a few more years; they pretend that they are younger than they are; they comfort themselves with a falsehood, and are as pleased to deceive themselves as if they deceived Fate at the same time. But when at last some infirmity has reminded them of their mortality, in what terror do they die, feeling that they are being dragged out of life, and not merely leaving it. They cry out that they have been fools, because they have not really lived, and that they will live the future in leisure if only they escape from this illness; then at last they reflect how uselessly they have striven for things which they did not enjoy, and how all their effort has gone for nothing. But for those whose life is passed without all unnecessary actions, why should it not be ample? None of it is assigned to another, none of it is scattered in this direction and that, none of it is committed to Fortune, none of it perishes from neglect, none is subtracted by wasteful giving, none of it is unused; the whole of it, so to speak, yields income. And so, however small the amount of it, it is abundantly sufficient,

and therefore, whenever his last day shall come, the wise man will not hesitate to go to meet death with a steady step.

12.

Perhaps you ask who I would call 'the engrossed'? There is no reason for you to suppose that I mean only those that have at length been in court, those who you see either gloriously crushed in their own crowd of followers, or scornfully in someone else's, those whose social duties call them from their own homes to someone else's door, or who the official's hammer keeps busy in seeking to prove them disreputable. Even the leisure of some men is engrossed; in their villa or on their couch, in their solitude, although they have withdrawn from all others, they are themselves the source of their own worry; we should say that these are living, not in leisure, but in busy idleness. Tell me, would you say that a man is at leisure by passing many hours at the barber's while they are being stripped of whatever grew out the night before? While a solemn debate is held over each separate hair? While either disarranged locks are restored to their place or thinning ones drawn from this side and that toward the forehead? How angry they get if the barber has been a bit too careless, just as if he were shearing a real man! How they flare up if any of their mane is

chopped off, if any of it lies out of order, if it does not all fall into its proper ringlets! Who of these would rather have the state disordered than his hair? Who is not more concerned to have his head trimmed perfectly rather than have a safe environment? Who would rather be well barbered than upright? Would you say that these are at leisure who are occupied with the comb and the mirror? And what about those who are engaged in hearing and learning songs, twisting the voice into the winding course of some meaningless tune, when the best and simplest movement nature designed was to be straightforward. Those who are always snapping their fingers as they beat time to some song they have in their head, who are overheard humming a tune when they have been summoned to serious, often even melancholy, matters? These have not leisure, but idle occupation. And their feasts, Heaven knows! I can only imagine their unoccupied hours, since I see how anxiously they set out their silver plate, how breathlessly they watch to see in what style the wild boar is served from the hands of the cook, with what speed at a given signal smooth-faced boys hurry to perform their duties, with what skill the birds are carved into portions all according to rule,

how carefully unhappy little lads wipe up the puke of drunkards. By such means they seek the reputation of having great attention to detail and elegance, and to such an extent do their evils follow them into all the privacies of life that they can neither eat nor drink without a pretentious display of wealth and luxury. And I would not count these among the leisured class either—the men who have themselves been chauffeured around, and are punctual at the hours for their rides as if it were unlawful to omit them, who are reminded by someone else when they must bathe, when they must swim, when they must dine; so enfeebled are they by the state of mental weakness of a pampered mind that they cannot find out by themselves whether they are hungry! I hear that one of these pampered people—provided that you can call it pampering to unlearn the habits of human life—when he had been lifted by hands from the bath and placed in his chair, said questioningly: "Am I now seated?" Do you think that this man, who does not know whether he is sitting, knows whether he is alive, whether he sees, whether he is at leisure? I find it hard to say whether I pity him more if he really did not know, or if he

pretended not to know this. They really are subject to forgetfulness of many things, but they also pretend forgetfulness of a lot. Some vices please them as they feel these are proof of their prosperity; it seems there is a part of these men which is very lowly and despicable to know they are actually doing this. After this imagine that there are those who fabricate many things to make a copy of luxury! In very truth, they miss more than they invent. Such a multitude of unbelievable vices has come forth in this age, which are so deceiving that we even fail to recognize them in other people. To think that there is anyone who is so lost in luxury that he takes another's word as to whether he is sitting down! This man, then, is not at leisure, you must apply to him a different term—he is sick, he is dead; a man is at leisure, when he also has a perception of his leisure. But this other who is half alive, who, in order that he may know the postures of his own body needs someone to tell him—how can he be the master of any of his time?

13.

It would be tedious to mention all the different men who have spent the whole of their life over chess or ball or the practice of baking their bodies in the sun. They are not unoccupied; their pleasures make a busy occupation. For instance, no one will have any doubt that there are laborious men who spend their time on useless literary problems. Now even among the Romans there is a great number these. It was once a characteristic confined to the Greeks to inquire into what number of rowers Ulysses had, whether the Iliad or the Odyssey was written first, whether moreover they belong to the same author, and various other matters of this stamp, which, if you keep them to yourself, in no way pleasure your secret soul, and, if you publish them, make you seem more of a bore than a scholar. But now this vain passion for learning useless things has assailed the Romans also. In the last few days I heard someone saying who was the first Roman general to do this or that; Duilius was the first who won a naval battle, Curius Dentatus was the first who had elephants lead in his triumph. Still, these matters, even if they add nothing to real glory, are nevertheless

concerned with services to the state; there will be no profit in such knowledge, nevertheless it wins our attention by reason of the attractiveness of an empty subject. We may excuse also those who inquire into this—who first induced the Romans to go on board a ship. It was Claudius, and this was the very reason he was surnamed Caudex, because among the ancients a structure formed by joining together several boards was called a *caudex*, and also the Tables of the Law are called *codices*, and, in ancient fashion, boats that carry provisions up the river are even to-day called *codicariae*. Doubtless this too may have some point—the fact that Valerius Corvinus was the first to conquer Messana, and was the first of the family of the Valerii to bear the surname Messana because he had transferred the name of the conquered city to himself, and was later called Messala after the gradual corruption of his name in popular speech. Perhaps you will permit someone to be interested also in this—the fact that Lucius Sulla was the first to exhibit loose lions in the Circus, though at other times they were exhibited in chains, and that javelin-throwers were sent by King Bocchus to despatch them? And, doubtless, this too may find some

excuse—but does it serve any useful purpose to know that Pompey was the first to exhibit the slaughter of eighteen elephants in the Circus, pitting criminals against them in a battle? He, a leader of the state and one who, according to a report, was conspicuous among the leaders out of the kindness of his heart, thought it a notable kind of spectacle to kill human beings as a new fashion. Do they fight to the death? That is not enough! Are they torn to pieces? That is not enough! Let them be crushed by animals of monstrous bulk! What blindness has been cast upon our minds! When he was sending so many troops of disgusting human beings to fight wild beasts, when he was creating war between creatures so unfairly matched, when he was shedding so much blood before the eyes of the Roman people, who was it that soon was forced to shed more. He then believed that he was beyond the power of Nature. But later this same man, betrayed by Alexandrine's treachery, offered himself to challenge the vilest human, and then at last discovered what an empty boast his surname was. Returning to the point from which I have digressed, the man I mentioned related to Metellus, when he triumphed after his victory over the Carthaginians in Sicily,

was the only one of all the Romans who had caused a hundred and twenty captured elephants to be led before his car; that Lucius Sulla was the last of the Romans who extended the *pomerium*, the religious boundary of Rome, which in old times was customary to extend after the acquisition of Italian but never of provincial territory. Is it more profitable to know this than that Mount Aventine, according to him, is outside the *pomerium*, for one of two reasons, either because that was the place of which the commoners had moved to, or because the birds had not been favourable when Remus one of the founders of Rome observed them on that spot—and, in turn, countless other reports that are either crammed with falsehood or are of the same sort? You may grant that they tell these things in good faith, though they pledge themselves for the truth of what they write, still will these mistakes be made fewer by such stories? Whose passions will they restrain? Whom will they make more brave, whom more just, whom more noble-minded? My friend Fabianus used to say that at times he was doubtful whether it was better to apply oneself to any studies than to become entangled in these.

14.

Of all men they alone are at leisure who take time for philosophy, they alone really live; for they are not content to be good guardians of their own lifetime only. They take from every age to add to their own; all the years that have gone before them are an addition to their store. Unless we are most ungrateful, all those men, glorious tailors of holy thoughts, were born for us; for us they have prepared a way of life. By other men's labours we are led to the sight of things most beautiful that have been wrestled from darkness and brought into light; from no age are we shut out, we have access to all ages, and if it is our wish, by greatness of mind, to pass beyond the narrow limits of human weakness, there is a great stretch of time through which we may roam. We may argue with Socrates, we may doubt with Carneades, find peace with Epicurus, overcome human nature with the Stoics, exceed it with the Cynics. Since Nature allows us to enter into fellowship with every age, why should we not turn from this small and fleeting span of time and surrender ourselves with all our soul to the past, which is boundless, which is eternal, which we share with our betters? Those who

rush about in the performance of social duties, who give themselves and others no rest, when they have fully indulged their madness, when they have crossed everybody's threshold, and have left no door unvisited, when they have carried around their corrupt greetings to houses that are very far apart—out of a city so huge and torn by such varied desires, how many left will they be able to see? How many will there be who keep them out! How many will rush by them, pretending to be in a hurry! How many of these men, still half asleep and sluggish from last night's debasement of moral purity, only just using their lips in the middle of the most insolent yawn, manage to command unhappy souls, who break their own sleep in order to wait on another. We may say fairly however, that those who are engaged in the true duties of life shall wish to have Zeno, Pythagoras, Democritus, and all the other high priests of liberal studies, and Aristotle and Theophrastus, as their most intimate friends every day. No one of these will be "not at home," no one of these will fail to have his visitors leave any happier and more devoted to himself than when he came, no one of these will allow anyone to leave him with empty hands; all mortals can meet with the noblest

men night or day.

15.

None of these noble men will force you to die, but all will teach you how to die; none will wear out your years, but each will add his own years to yours; conversations with none of these will bring you peril, the friendship of none of these will endanger your life, the courting of none will tax your wallet. From them you will take whatever you wish; it will be no fault of theirs if you do not draw what you desire. What happiness awaits him who has offered himself as an associate to these noble men! He will have friends from whom he may seek counsel on matters great and small, whom he may consult every day about himself, from whom he may hear truth without insult, praise without flattery, and a likeness of them he may fashion himself to. It is not in our power to choose the parents attributed to us, they have been given to men by chance; yet *we* may be the sons of whoever we choose. Out of the noblest of intellects; choose the one into which you wish to be adopted; you will inherit not merely their name, but even their property, which there will be no need to guard in a mean spirit; the more people you share it with, the greater it will become. These will open to you

to the path of immortality, and will raise you to a height from which no one is cast down. This is the only way of prolonging mortality—or of turning it into immortality. Honours, monuments, all that has been commanded by official order: works of stone, quickly sink to ruin; there is nothing that the lapse of time does not tear down and remove. But the works which philosophy that have been created to promote morals cannot be harmed; no age will destroy them, no age reduce them; the following and each succeeding age will but increase the reverence for them, since envy works upon what is close at hand, the things that are far off we are more free to admire. The life of the philosopher, therefore, has wide range, and he is not confined by the same bounds that shut others in. He alone is freed from the limitations of the human race; all ages serve him as if a god. Has some time passed by? This he embraces by recollection. Is time present? This he uses. Is it still to come? This he anticipates. He makes his lifelong by combining all times into one.

16.

But those who forget the past, neglect the present, and fear for the future have a life that is very brief and troubled; when they have reached the end of it, the unhappy perceive too late that for such a long while they have been occupied in doing nothing. Have you any reason to think that they find life long? In their folly they are harassed by shifting emotions which rush them into the very things they dread; they often pray for death because they fear it. And have you any reason to think that they are living a long time? The fact that the day often seems to them very long, the fact that they complain that the hours are passing so slowly until the time set for dinner arrives; for, whenever their engrossments are not there, they are restless because they are left with nothing to do, and they do not know how to use their leisure time. And so they strive for something else to occupy them, and all the intervening time is annoying; exactly as they are annoyed when a gladiatorial exhibition has been announced, or when they are waiting for the appointed time of some other show or amusement, they want to skip over the days that lie between. All postponement of

something they hope for seems long to them. Yet the time which they enjoy is short and swift, and it is made much shorter by their own fault; for they flee from one pleasure to another and cannot remain fixed in one desire. Their days are not long to them, but hateful; yet, on the other hand, how insufficient seem the nights which they spend in the arms of a promiscuous woman or in alcohol! It is this also that accounts for the madness of poets who encourage human frailty by the tales in which they present. For all they do is encourage our vices and inscribe the name of the gods as their sponsors, and to present the indulgence of divinity as an example of our own weakness. Can the nights which they pay for so dearly fail to seem all too short to these men? They lose the day in expectation of the night, and the night in fear of the dawn.

17.

The very pleasures of such men are uneasy and unsettled by alarms of various sorts, and at the very moment of rejoicing the anxious thoughts come over them: How long will it last?" This feeling has led kings to weep over the power they possessed. They have not delighted in the greatness of their fortune, as they have viewed with terror the end to which it must some time come. When the King of Persia, in all the insolence of his pride, spread his army over the vast plains and could not grasp its number but simply its measure, he shed abundant tears because no man of such a mighty army had ever been seen alive for very long. He wept to bring upon others their fate, to give some their doom at sea, some on the land, some in battle, some in flight, and within a short time to destroy all those who he had fear of. So why is it that even their joys are unsettled by fear? Because they do not rest on stable causes, and are upset like they day they were born. What do you make of those times which even by their own confession they are unhappy, since even the joys by which they are exalted and lifted above mankind are by no means pure? All the greatest blessings are a source of

anxiety, and at no time is fortune less wisely trusted. To maintain prosperity there is need of other prosperity, and on behalf of the prayers that have turned out well we must make further prayers. For everything that comes to us from chance is unstable, and the higher it rises, the more liable it is to fall. Moreover, what is doomed to perish brings pleasure to no one; therefore, the life of those who work hard to gain, must work harder to keep. By great toil they attain what they wish, and with anxiety hold what they have attained; meanwhile they take no account of time that will never more return. New engrossments take the place of the old, hope leads to new hope, ambition to new ambition. They do not seek an end of their unhappiness, but change the cause. Have we been tormented by our own public duty? Then those others take more of our time. Have we ceased to labor as job candidates? We then begin to work for others. Have we got rid of the troubles of a prosecutor? We then find ourselves before a judge. Has a man ceased to be a judge? He then becomes president of a court. Reasons for anxiety will never be lacking, whether born of prosperity or of unhappiness; life pushes on in a succession of engrossments. We shall always

pray for leisure, but never enjoy it.

18.

And so, my dearest people, tear yourself away from the crowd, and at length withdraw into a peaceful harbour. Think of how many waves you have encountered, how many storms, on the one hand, you have sustained in private life, how many, on the other, you have brought upon yourself in public life; long enough has your virtue been displayed in labor—see how it will behave in leisure. The greater part of your life has been given to the state; take part of your time for yourself as well. And I do not summon you to slothful or idle inaction, or to drown all your energy in slumbers and the pleasures that are dear to the crowd. That is not to rest; you will find far greater works than all those you have until now performed so energetically, to occupy you in the middle of your release and rest. You, I know, manage the accounts of the whole world as honestly as you would a stranger's, as carefully as you would your own, as conscientiously as you would the state's. You win love in an office in which it is difficult to avoid hatred: but nevertheless believe me, it is better to have knowledge of the ledger of one's own life than of the corn-market. Recall that keen mind of yours, which

is most competent to cope with the greatest subjects, which is now occupied in service that is indeed honorable but hardly adapted to the happy life, and reflect that in all your training in the liberal studies, extending from your earliest years, you were not aiming at this—you had hope of something greater and grander. There will be no lack of men with worth in the labor market. But some are much more suited to carrying heavy loads than thoroughbred horses. Reflect, besides, how much worry you have in subjecting yourself to such a great burden; your dealings are with the greed of man. These hungry people neither listen to reason, or are appeased by justice, of willing to hear any humble request. Very recently within those few days after Caesar died—still grieving most deeply (if the dead have any feeling) because he knew that the Roman people were alive and had enough food left for at any rate seven or eight days while he was building his bridges of boats and playing with the resources of the empire, we were threatened with the worst evil that can befall men even during a siege—the lack of provisions; his imitation of a mad, foreign and proud king was very nearly at the cost of the city's destruction and famine and the general

revolution that follows famine. Those then who had charge of the corn-market had to face stones, the sword and fire. By the greatest deceit they concealed the great evil that lurked in the state—with good reason, you may be sure. For certain ailments must be treated while the patient is kept in ignorance; knowledge of their disease has caused the death of many.

19.

Do you wish to retire to these quieter, safer, greater things! You think it is the same having corn from overseas poured into the granaries, either by the dishonesty or the neglect of those who transport it, in seeing that it does not become heated and spoiled by collecting moisture which tallies in weight and measure. Whether you enter upon these sacred studies with the purpose of discovering what substance, what pleasure, what mode of life, what shape God has; what fate awaits your soul; where nature lays us to rest, when we are freed from the body; what the principle is that upholds all the heaviest matter in the center of this world, suspends the light, carries fire to the top, summons the stars – the universe is full of mighty wonders. You really must leave the ground and turn your mind's eye upon these things! Now while the blood is hot, we must move with brisk steps upon a better course. In this kind of life there awaits much that is good to know—the love and practice of the virtues, forgetfulness of the passions, knowledge of living and dying, and a life of deep tranquility. The condition of all who are engrossed is poor, but poorest is the condition

of those who labour at engrossments that are not even their own, who regulate their sleep by that of another, their walk by the pace of another, who are under orders—loving and hating. If these wish to know how short their life is, let them reflect how small a part of it is their own.

20.

And so, when you see a man often wearing the robe of office, when you see one whose name is famous in the forum, do not envy him; those things are bought at the price of life. They will waste their years, in order that they may have their name recognised. Life has left some in the middle of their first struggles, before they could ever climb up to the height of their ambition; some, when they have crawled through a thousand indignities to the crowning dignity, have been possessed by the unhappy thought that they have but toiled for an inscription on a tomb; some who have come to extreme old age, while they adjusted it to new hopes as if it were youth, have had their hopes fail from sheer weakness in the middle of their great and shameless endeavours. Shameful is he who runs out of breath in the middle of a pursuit when, advanced in years and still courting the applause of an ignorant circle, is pleading for attention from strangers; disgraceful is he who, exhausted more quickly by his mode of living than by his labour, collapses in the very middle of his duties. I cannot pass over an instance which occurs to me. Sextus Turannius was an old man of long

tested diligence, who, after his ninetieth year, having received release from the duties of his office by Caesar, ordered himself to be laid out on his bed and to be mourned by the household as if he were dead. The whole house moaned about the leisure of its old master, and their sorrow did not end until his accustomed work was restored to him. Is it really such pleasure for a man to die in bed? Yet very many have the same feeling; their desire for their labour lasts longer than their ability; they fight against the weakness of the body, they judge old age to be a hardship, nothing else, because it puts them aside. The law does not draft a soldier after his fiftieth year, it does not call a senator after his sixtieth; it is more difficult for men to obtain leisure from themselves than from the law. Meantime, while they rob and are being robbed, while they break up each other's tranquility, while they make each other poor, their life is without profit, without pleasure, without any improvement of the mind. No one keeps death in view, no one refrains from far-reaching hopes; some men, indeed, even arrange for things that lie beyond life—huge masses of tombs and dedications of public works and gifts for their funeral. Such pretentious displays, but, in very truth, the

funerals of such men ought to be conducted by the light of torches, and end as though they had lived but the tiniest span.

END

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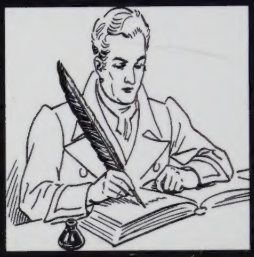

James Harris, on a mission to learn through the power of language, passionate and fascinated by words, their use in developing the mind and their ability to spark the imagination; through reading was able to realise that we have the capability to acquire new thoughts from others, to learn from the wisest and noblest of people that have gone before us, and that we can have direct access to the thoughts of amazing people who sit outside our social circle. Because of this James decided to read the classics and take the knowledge contained in these as his own.

What was discovered is that language evolves and although the thoughts contained in these books are still relevant today, the language used to express them isn't always coherent with the present. This led James to translate the classic texts into modern form, reviving them for future generations, making them quicker to read and easier to understand for the contemporary reader.

ISBN 9781539951919

KR-148-731